

Guest Editorial in the Mt. Sterling Advocate by Dr. Joshua E. Powell
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January is school board recognition month in the Commonwealth of Kentucky and I want to express my respect for the position of board member. Most people are vaguely familiar, at best, with the roles and responsibilities of board members and the various challenges that are associated with the important position. With increased expectations, dwindling resources, and public scrutiny regarding any decision made, being a member of a school board is a large and daunting task.

When board members are elected and sworn in, each quickly realizes the complexities of being a part of a public school district. In Kentucky's 120 counties, there are 173 public school districts and, in most cases, the public school district is the largest employer in the county. This can lead to community pressure exerted by those that elect board members to influence various decisions, including but not limited to hiring individuals, tax rates, changing a decision that an administrator or teacher made, etc. Most board members initially set out to make a positive difference in the lives of children. However, the aforementioned often complicates these sincere and noble efforts because, at times, working to resolve issues for a minor portion of the member's constituency can prove to be very challenging.

The role of the school board significantly changed with the passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 (KERA) which, among other things, specifically prohibited any board member from having influence on personnel in public schools. Board member responsibilities include approving tax rates, evaluation of the superintendent, selection of board attorney, policy setting, and allocation of resources. In addition, board members are only active during a public meeting at which time they vote on presented items. Once the meeting is adjourned board members are not to have any influence on the organization and management of the school district outside of a public meeting. With this, board members, who quickly develop a working knowledge of district operations, must listen to constituents, as well as maintain a balance of doing what is in the best interest of the silent constituents; the children.

Although an elected position, a school board member in the Commonwealth of Kentucky is much more consistent with that of leader than politician because board members have to make the toughest decisions, which are often rife with criticism and conspiracy. They take numerous phone calls, have at least two meetings per month, have several face-to-face contacts regarding school business, are required to attend seminars/training, and are some of the lowest paid elected officials, as no board member can make more than \$3,000 per year.

In Montgomery County, our board members have been steadfast in making decisions in the best interests of children, regardless of criticism, and have accomplished more than any other board in the Commonwealth. Our vision, *To Lead All of Kentucky's Children by Achieving Top Ten in Everything We Do*, emanates

from the Montgomery County Board of Education and, although it has not been easy, the Board remains committed to being the best. Since 2012, despite economic difficulties and depleted resources, our district has accomplished rapid growth in every major area and increased academic expectations, such as:

- Tremendous job growth (approximately 40 additional jobs),
- Raises for all employees (2012, approximately \$900,000 per year),
- Increased test score ranking from 132nd to 29th in two years,
- Increased taxes only once in the last seven years (2011, most of that increase was given to the inadequately funded Sheriff's department),
- Developed one of the lowest faculty to student ratios in Kentucky (22:1); was 27:1 in 2011,
- Developed an accelerated and an alternative school,
- Spent over \$3 million in technology upgrades (including Smart Boards installed in every elementary classroom)
- Assumed all nursing salaries from the Health Department (approximately \$200,000)
- One of the highest increases in TELL survey (working conditions) in KY (2011 to 2013), and
- Highly successful sports programs.

Unlike many, our school district has embraced the challenges and seized the opportunity to improve public education and when many boards are struggling to make ends meet, we are thriving amidst some of the most difficult times in the history of public education. Even though our district invested in substantial job growth, raises for every employee and suffered significant reductions in funding, we were able to have the largest reserves in the history of the school district in 2012 and 2013, which was 36% and 31%, respectively. Moreover, our Board put our money into personnel instead of programs, made significant reductions to contract work, and dramatically increased the number of employees working with our students. Our school board members remained focused on turning around a school district, despite criticism or controversy, and, frankly, considering the above accomplishments, have produced the most successful and comprehensive turnaround of a school district in the history of public education. I am proud to be associated with the board members that I have worked with in Montgomery County.

It is with great sincerity that I thank the school board members, past and present. I am reminded of a favorite poem, "The Road Not Taken," by Robert Frost, as I want to commend the Board of Education members in Montgomery County for going down the "road less traveled by" which has truly "made all the difference" in this great community.

Thank you,

Joshua E. Powell, Ph.D.